



## Review of 'Le Corbusier Le Grand'

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## LE CORBUSIER LE GRAND



For the generation to whom the eight volume Oeuvre complète is unknown, and who believe from what they have read or been told that the architect in question is urbanisms equivalent of 'Rosemary's Baby', this book and current major travelling exhibition may come as something of a surprise. Not due to the sheer physicality of this thundering big book, but by the enormity and range of ideas contained within it.

Any book that aims to capture the vast architectural and personal output of the remarkable 'Corbu' is attempting the impossible. But twenty years on from the last major retrospective of the architect's work, perhaps the time is right to attempt again, and for a different generation.

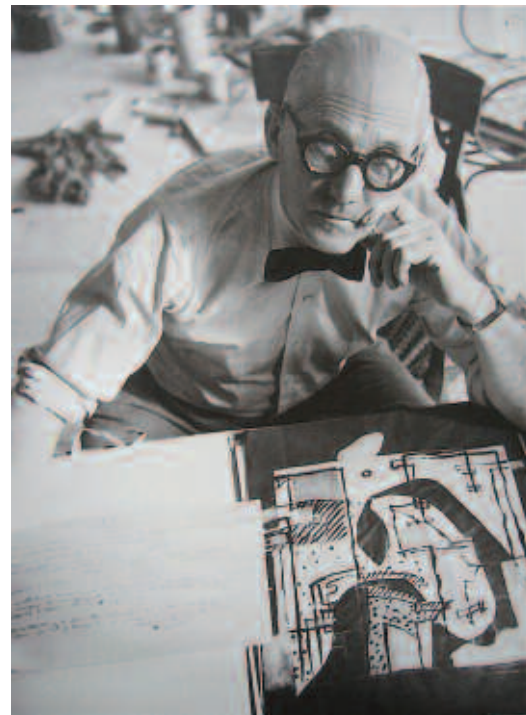


For architects of an older generation this book will be something of an aide mémoire of an unmistakable period in architecture when each project coming from the Rue de Sevres would change and influence the direction of thought, conversation and building in their studios across the world.

Even by the standards of today's media frenzied celebrity architects Le Corbusier was known in a way that almost symbolizes the image of the architect: the thick dark glasses, the bow tie (now abandoned), gesturing at models while furiously sketching amidst a sea of admirers or wondering



across the construction site with Homeric abandon. And yet, few architects have aroused such extremes of opinion: from public and professional loathing to a deep devotional respect. From the high mountains of La Chaux-de-Fonds was to come an architect that was to have a profound influence on the evolution of modern architecture. He would revolutionize the way subsequent architects could find space to explore ideas, discover different ways of working, question the canons of ►



► history and experiment with new materials and forms in a way that had been previously unimaginable.

The vibrant drawings of a young artist protégé, the delicate watercolours on the grand tour, the emergent purist lines of provocative white villas and a whole morphology of observational studies, the 'secret laboratory' of Le Corbusier's art and architecture is laid out powerfully in this book. Beyond the expected coverage of familiar key buildings and events is the incredible world of Le Corbusier letter writer extraordinaire. Pages of crafted letters to his parents, his wife, brother, clients, politicians, acquaintances and colleagues are brought to life on these super large pages and with full translations in an accompanying slim book.

Touching moments of personal reflection and unique observations that were previously private or known only to those willing to spend long hours in the archives in Paris are now all available in this book. His emotional letter explaining the design of his father's grave to his mother in 1927, an extraordinary letter to Mrs Meyer in 1925 describing the ideas for her house, correspondence with Josephine Baker, Picasso, Léger and many others all reveal a deep sense of humour and raw passion in his letters. He was without doubt a prolific letter writer who populated them with caricatures, drawings and confessional philosophy that will be surprising to some. This aspect of his life has often been underplayed but is central to this book's quality and to any understanding of the architect. The translation supplement is in itself an interesting read with many of the translations in English now for the first time. It opens with a French/English glossary of architectural terms to decode the drawings.

That so little has been written in detail of his private life - by agreement or silence - has been the source of speculation and much has remained a mystery. Few have attempted to flesh out aspects beyond the buildings in a way that is only a bare

trace of public/private moments mixed with quotes from private notebooks. But what this book does is make explicit both visually and in the correspondence, the force of personality that was at play. Whether wandering around with Picasso at the Unite in Marseille, with Einstein on the lawns at Princeton or the sensuous wooing of Josephine Baker on a cruise to South America, the personality and fame of Le Corbusier (public and private) is captured in an array of superb photographs and documents.

Structuring Le Corbusier's life and work in 10 distinct thematic sections the book sets out something of the context and contradictions of the architect's life and work: 'Paris, Vichy and the War', 'The Sacred and the Sublime', and 'Mediterranean Days' are some of the frameworks which are used. That Corbusier was embroiled in a difficult liaison with the officials of the Vichy regime and which was to alienate him in the post war context from his collaborators and possible clients, is well known. As is the fact that much of his ideas took shape in the little Caban at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin where he took a 'sacred' month off in August. Or ►







► that he painted every morning before travelling to the office, was all central to understanding his unique character.

The spontaneity and power of the drawings and observations in Le Corbusier sketchbooks and journals are extraordinary. From the careful studies of churches in Florence, Greek sculpture, pottery, the ruins in Pompeii, the wing of an aeroplane, through to the contortionist gymnastics in Parisian Brothels, the architect's eye took in everything, and recorded it for future use. Nothing was ignored or overlooked. The skill of the drawings brilliant and economic with line and tone are clear to see. The painful pencil drawing of the reclining head of his dying father, the debris of fishing boats at the edge of the shoreline, female figures intertwined and dancing to music, the hills of Rio de Janeiro and the studies of the simple objects on the table around him are celebrated by the directness of the sketch and drawing, and are brought to life by the quality of reproduction in this book.

Much has been made about the paintings that to some are only pseudo Picasso. But research has revealed the importance of a rich symbolic, mythic and iconographic reading of them. *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit*, a testament and summation to his own personal philosophy extricate him from any narrow view of him as the dry, functional, machine aesthete. The pebbles, shells and figure drawings reformed into symbolic animals and geometries are the key to such late works as *Ronchamp* or *Chandigarh* and can all be traced in the paintings. Le Corbusier refused to discuss his paintings and preferred that they speak for themselves. In a sense this is the approach of the book, not labouring any academic interpretation but providing a massive body of work for you to judge. Equally the introductory essay and short chapter introductions are concise and set the themes clearly, succinctly and usefully and are by two key Corbusier historians: Tim Benton and Jean-Louis-Cohen, and these ensure its authority.

While holding this book on your knees and as they begin to sag, the memory of Salvador Dali's comment that Le Corbusier turned into concrete and sank comes to mind. At almost 10kg the weight of modernism is hard to bare. In bookshops it has its own stand- a lectern for the faithful to pay homage. And so while Taschen and Phaidon play out a sumo contest of huge and lavish books and the number of publications on Le Corbusier reaches epic proportions this book will take its place in a series of memorable and collectible editions on Le Corbusier. A big book suitable for the godfather of modern architecture it is an evocative and plentiful reference storehouse of well printed and considered material for both Le Corbusier scholars and newcomers alike. At times a personal, almost private album made public, the collage of papers, sketches, photographs, letters, certificates, newspaper cuttings and passports makes revealing reading and study tracing the creative genealogy of the Swiss master. It has a big ambition that goes beyond the gimmick of its super large status. Maybe it will awaken a different reading or a new interest for some?

Once on meeting Jane Drew -one of Le Corbusier's key collaborators in India- and as we started talk, she told me outright to get the "Le Corbusier question over with". It seemed that everyone always asked her the same question: "so what was he really like?" Maybe this book is another attempt to try to answer this. ●

**Paul Clarke**

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